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SUBJECT: BOUTEFLIKA'S HEALTH BECOMES THE SUBJECT OF OPEN
SPECULATION

REF: ALGIERS 1835

Classified By: Ambassador Robert Ford, reasons 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Summary: President Bouteflika's remark to the media on November 13 that his health has improved has not stopped speculation about his medical situation. Many of our political contacts speculate that the President's physical condition is behind the delay in a referendum on constitutional amendments. Our sense is that very few Algerian officials really know the truth about Bouteflika's health, but we tend also to think that lack of consensus among the top circles of power about his successor is indeed behind the indefinite postponement of the referendum. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Algerians are increasingly discussing and expressing concern about President Bouteflika's health. His infrequent public appearances and the postponement of a referendum on constitutional reform expected for December have led ordinary Algerians to conclude that the president's health is declining. While the presidency denies that anything ails Bouteflika, the public generally believes he suffers from stomach or intestinal cancer. So widespread is the concern that independent media reporting on what one paper called the "deterioration" of Bouteflika's health has suddenly taken a remarkable turn toward the prolific. By comparison, when Bouteflika was hospitalized in Paris in late 2005, the Algerian press -- both official and private -- stuck to reporting the uninformative government communiques on Bouteflika's condition.

¶3. (C) Prime Minister Belkhadem, in an unusual television interview November 12, claimed that Bouteflika was healthy and pondering two or three drafts of proposed changes to the constitution. He echoed Interior Minister Zerhouni's November 1st announcement of the delay in the referendum for "technical reasons," saying that it would probably occur next spring. Belkhadem stressed that the postponement was of minor importance. Belkhadem's predecessor, Ahmed Ouyahia, thought by most our contacts to be the leading candidate for a new vice presidential position, separately asserted that nothing was wrong with Bouteflika's health. These reassurances from senior political leaders appear to be having the opposite effect, confirming the suspicions of many Algerians that something is indeed wrong with Bouteflika's health. Bouteflika himself did not alleviate public concern November 14 when he said alongside a visiting French minister, "It's true that I was very ill, but now I am much better."

¶4. (C) Senior representatives of the major political parties who met with us this week continued to express support for the "president's prerogative" to propose constitutional changes that would be in the best interest of the country, but they offered starkly different explanations for the delay. Riad Anan of the FLN, Algeria's largest political party of which Bouteflika is the honorary head, said the delays were for purely technical reasons. Surprisingly, he also agreed with RCD (opposition Berber) party representative Tarik Mira's assertion that organizing a referendum was problematic given the May 2007 parliamentary and October 2007 local elections already on the calendar. For his part, Mira accepted the Interior Minister's "technical" explanation for the delay. Opposition (and moderate Islamist) party Islah's representative, on the other hand, believed Bouteflika had encountered resistance to elements of his original proposal and decided to consult further with key "political stake holders" before bringing the plan to a vote.

¶5. (C) Probably because we met them as a group, the party representatives avoided speculating on succession and Bouteflika's health. The FLN's Anan said he was not a physician and could not speak authoritatively on matters of personal health. He nonetheless went to great lengths to recall that Bouteflika had met with his ministers to review their performance without resting or breaking his fast during Ramadan. Could a sick man, he asked, show such stamina? Anan said Bouteflika was no longer in his twenties and could not be expected to be as vigorous as he was a few years ago. No one disagreed.

¶6. (C) Comment: According to the current constitution, the Senate president will become president of the republic if Bouteflika dies in office. He assumes the post for 60 days

while presidential elections are held, but he cannot stand as a candidate himself. The uncertain outcome of this process appears to worry elements of the regime. A clearer line of succession would address their concerns, but requires settling on a particular candidate. The announcement of the delay in the constitutional referendum is now being interpreted both privately and in the independent media as being linked to difficulties associated with choosing a specific vice presidential candidate to put forward as part of the reform proposal. Some insiders -- including an ex-presidential counselor -- are even theorizing that the ongoing succession debate will prompt a delay in the May parliamentary elections. One well-informed contact close to former PM (and presumed vice presidential contender) Ouyahia waved aside all the media and political-cocktail-circuit chatter. Only a handful of the top leaders (read Bouteflika and the military) know the truth about Bouteflika's health, he observed, and Bouteflika might yet surprise people. In any case, the rest of Algeria will have to wait for those top few to come to an agreement on what to do.

FORD